

String Puppets of Tamil Nadu

VENKAT SWAMINATHAN

There are three streams of puppetry in Tamil Nadu, as elsewhere in southern India. The earliest reference to puppetry in Tamil literature occurs in the classic *Silappadikaram*, written some time between the second century B.C. and A.D. second century; this reference is to shadow puppets. If you come down to the tenth century, Manickavachagar, a mystic Saivite saint, again refers to shadow puppets. Both these references to shadow puppets are made to illustrate the unreality of earthly existence — as though to say, life is like a shadow cast on the puppeteer's screen, evanescent and unsubstantial. But human imagination couldn't forever be content with shadows, even in art. A human would eventually create something in his own likeness. That creation is the marionette.

Notwithstanding the antiquity of the puppet theatre in the Tamil country, Tamil puppeteers in present-day Tamil Nadu are almost extinct; they have all gone over to Kerala. That happened some time during the sixteenth or seventeenth century, when they migrated en masse at the invitation of the Cochin Maharaja. Although they are Tamil, their narration is now in Malayalam. But the script on which the performance is based is the tenth-century Tamil work *Kamba Ramayanam*. They perform for the benefit of the Malayalam-speaking audience in Kerala. There are only twenty troupes or so performing with shadow puppets in Tamil Nadu, and they are all Maharashtrian. These puppeteers started migrating to the Tamil country four or five hundred years ago. They migrated from Maharashtra to Andhra, and from Andhra to Karnataka; another branch came into Tamil Nadu. Shadow puppets in present-day Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh follow a common tradition. The puppets are the same, and the technique is the same except for individual variations.

Shadow puppet artists in Tamil Nadu are a depressed lot. They are very poor . . . As for the marionette tradition, we can't trace it too far back in Tamil Nadu. These puppeteers belong to the middle middle class. Their performance falls into a classical or semi-classical pattern. They are based in Thanjavur district, the prime seat of Tamil culture. This marionette tradition is common to all the linguistic divisions of South India. You have seen the marionettes of Karnataka and of Andhra: Mr Srinivasa Rao showed us some of his [Andhra] puppets, and you have also seen the puppets of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The technique is the same. The way the puppets are made is also the same, except that the Tamil puppets are a little poorer in their embellishment and decorative detail. They are also much heavier, made of a wood called *kalyana-murungai* [*Delonix regia*]. When I asked the puppeteers here why they don't change over to a lighter material, they said one reason was their tradition. Another reason [stated] is that the puppets must have a certain weight for the puppeteers to perform [as they are accustomed to]. These are the differences. The rest is common. The puppeteers led by Sri T.N. Sankaranathan will now show you how they manipulate their puppets. You will see that the technique is common with Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

DISCUSSION

Komal Kothari: Let us have a look at the puppets. [*The puppets are shown.*]

Venkat Swaminathan: The hands are controlled by a rod, as in Karnataka puppetry. The strings are connected to a ring [worn on the puppeteer's head, serving as a control].

Komal Kothari: Will Mr Dattatreya tell us why this [weight in the centre of the ring] is needed?

A.R. Dattatreya: We call this *peeta*. Without this weight, the ring will move; it will be unstable.

Komal Kothari: But you did not use a weighted ring while performing?

A.R. Dattatreya: No, we didn't have to use it, because our [specially made] rings fit our heads perfectly. We have reduced the diameter of the ring so that it can sit on our heads without moving this way or that.

Komal Kothari: What kind of wood is this? It is a combination of two woods, as in Andhra and Karnataka?

A.R. Dattatreya: No, only one kind of wood has been used here.

Venkat Swaminathan: Though the parts are separately made, it is all of the same wood, kalyana-murungai. The tree blooms in summer. It has large red flowers. You can see it in bloom even in Delhi.

Komal Kothari: Is it used for any other purpose? For furniture or something else?

Venkat Swaminathan: It isn't used for anything else.

G. Venu: Do the puppeteers make their puppets themselves, or does some other community make them?

Venkat Swaminathan: They make the puppets themselves.

G. Venu: Even now?

Venkat Swaminathan: Yes.

Komal Kothari [to *A.R. Dattatreya*]: Will you comment on the weight of these puppets?

A.R. Dattatreya: I think they are heavier than ours.

Venkat Swaminathan: Some of these puppets weigh eight or nine kilograms.

A.R. Dattatreya: Formerly, ours were also like that. As I told you, this part of the body — the torso — is [now] made of a lighter wood, *halavana*. The other parts are made of *shivahonne*. [*Showing the head ring*] This kind of ring is a must. Otherwise the strings will come off. This particular ring is made of rubber, though; it might slip and keep moving when worn on the head. But we tie a gunny kerchief on the head, so that the ring doesn't move.

Dadi Pudumjee: Is this costume tied to the puppet, or is it stitched on? [*To A.R. Dattatreya*] Is the neck joint different from yours, or is it the same?

A.R. Dattatreya: It's the same. The technique is also the same.

Dadi Pudumjee: The neck movement would seem to be greater in this puppet.

A.R. Dattatreya: That is because they have separated the head [from the torso], you know. Our puppets' heads are interlocked with the body. And in the case of female characters, they are connected with thread with the body. Another difference — there is no string on the waist here [, as in the puppets of Karnataka].

Komal Kothari: Yes, the waist movements of these puppets wouldn't be under the puppeteer's control.

A.R. Dattatreya: The rest is the same. The same technique.

G. Venu: This character [*pointing out a dancer puppet*] was dressed in a loose sari yesterday, with *surya* and *chandra* ornamentation — the full costume of a devadasi. And in the sari, its movements looked very different. Now they have changed the costume. In the sari, we could immediately relate the movements to Bharatanatyam dance. I remember that Mohan Khokar has written in an article somewhere that the dances of our Southern puppets are a fair representation of the devadasis' dance.

Venkat Swaminathan: They have changed the costume for the sake of changing tastes in their audience — we now have a film-oriented audience [even in rural Tamil Nadu]. Earlier, the dress was not like that.

G. Venu: This dance [in puppet shows] is well known in Tamil Nadu . . . In the sari, very delicate movements are possible. The dancer even wipes her sweat, not on the costume as we see here, but on a piece of cloth which is given to her. All the details of the human dance come out very well in the puppet play.

Komal Kothari: Do the jerky movements of the puppet come from [the pull of] the ring?

A.R. Dattatreya: Yes Sir . . . The technique is more or less the same as ours . . . except that they have used five strings. Also, we can't move from backstage to the front; the back screen shields us, you know.

Dadi Pudumjee : The puppets here seem to operate under more than one system of control. Were they originally like that?

Venkat Swaminathan: Actually, we have different kinds of puppets, and the technique varies according to the movements shown. The ring and strings you see here are only for the dance movements. [*The dancer puppet is shown in action.*]

A.R. Dattatreya: The costuming here is influenced by modern trends. In some other shows from Tamil Nadu which I have seen, traditional ornaments are still used. The costume has completely changed here.

Komal Kothari: The controls have also changed?

G. Venu: No, this ring is only for the dancer [even in Karnataka puppets].

A.R. Dattatreya: Earlier, though, we used to have rings for all our puppets.

Komal Kothari [*lifting a Karnataka puppet*]: It's very light. Is it hollow, or is it made of some other material? And that [*pointing to the Tamil Nadu dancer puppet*] certainly seems very heavy. South Indian dancers are pretty plump, you know!

A.R. Dattatreya: We have reduced the weight by using a lighter wood for the body.

Komal Kothari [examining a Tamil Nadu puppet]: Yes, the same kind of control as we saw earlier. Come and see for yourself the difference in the weight of these puppets from Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

Dadi Pudumjee [holding the Tamil Nadu puppet]: It's heavy all right.

Komal Kothari: Is Kherati there? Come here and see this [examining a Karnataka puppet] — it's practically hollow.

A.R. Dattatreya: This is even lighter than usual. A different material has been used in this case.

Komal Kothari: I was telling you all the time this cannot be the same wood . . . To make puppets in Tamil Nadu, do they use wet wood or dry wood?

Venkat Swaminathan: The wood is first soaked in water for a week or so.

A.R. Dattatreya: The technique is basically the same, though there are some minor differences. [Examining a Tamil Nadu puppet] Komalji, this puppet has only two movements; it's made in two parts. The [corresponding] puppet in Karnataka has three movements. Ours is also the lighter of the two puppets.

Komal Kothari: Yes, this [Tamil Nadu] puppet doesn't have the wrist movement yours has.

[*Komal Kothari invites a Rajasthan puppeteer to manipulate the Tamil Nadu dancer puppet as the session comes to a close.*]